

The Clash of Paradigms: Australian Literary Theory after Liberalism

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I

It no longer requires feats of self-conscious defamiliarisation to question the institutions that underpin and naturalise national literatures. To mention a few such critiques of the past few decades: Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out that nations depend on narration to elaborate their cultural coherence (*Nation and Narration*); Edward Said has shown that literature sustains imperialism (*Culture and Imperialism*); Benedict Anderson has talked of nations as “imagined communities” formed around books (*Imagined Communities*); Trinh T. Minh-ha has argued that it is impossible to speak of ethnic identity without speaking of decentredness, multiplicity and hybridity (*Woman, Native, Other*); and Paul Gilroy has argued that cultural nationalisms can’t be understood outside the context of modernist internationalism (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*). Chris Baldick and Terry Eagleton have argued that literature became part of the education system because late-nineteenth-century England was otherwise short of mechanisms for social control. As Baldick says, Matthew Arnold “had often spoken of the need for a softening and humanizing influence to be exerted upon the masses in Britain, to wean them from class-conflict and intellectual turmoil, and had offered poetry as a means to that end” (65). As part of his own argument about literary nationalism Eagleton cites Baldick’s quoting of George Gordon, an early Oxford Professor of English, who announced in his inaugural address:

England is sick, and [. . .] English literature must save it. The churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature now has a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the state. (23)

That certain conceptual terrains and rhetorical moves are now prosaic to academic practice is a marker of the paradigm shifts that have taken place in the humanities since the late 1960s. New critical practices derived from Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, queer theory and postcolonialism have

all used strategies of defamiliarisation, based on the principle that not only are appearances deceptive, but critical outcomes are often counter-intuitive. Perhaps because of this, as Eagleton wrote of literary theory in 1983, “not much of this theoretical revolution has yet to spread beyond a circle of specialists and enthusiasts: it has still to make its impact on the student of literature and the general reader” (vii). Eagleton’s remark remains true now, over two decades later, at least in so far as dominant public modes of critique in Australia are concerned. What makes his comment relevant here, in the context of discussion about the public efficacy of contemporary critical theory in Australia, is the powerful role that “pre-revolutionary” forms of literary theory continue to play as guiding forms of public knowledge. Such ideas inform the “popular critical consciousness” in so far as popular discourse about the humanities remains dominated by modernist critical paradigms such as Leavisism and New Criticism, even underpinned by a throwback to a residual Arnoldianism.

In what follows I want to discuss the ways in which the practice of contemporary literary theory in Australia, along with most varieties of critical theory produced since the late 1960s, is losing whatever relevance it once had, not because “theory” has lost its potential force as intellectual and therefore public discourse or because its “moment” has passed, but because the contexts in which it operated have radically changed. To put it another way, there has been much discussion about the “end of theory” in recent times, but not much about the crisis of liberalism. The present crisis in theory, I argue, has occurred because “theory” is an oppositional discourse of critique whose traditional “target”, liberalism, is in a state of deep crisis, having begun to lose its status as the epistemological axis of western civic discourse. This crisis, which goes to the heart of literary critical formations such as Australian post-Leavisite liberalism, that have acted as handmaidens to liberal ideology, has occurred as a new political force has emerged, capable of making new social meanings and connecting them with power in ways that neither theory nor liberalism have been able to anticipate or meaningfully counter. I speak, of course, of the rise of the new conservatism and the increasing entrenchment of neo-liberalism, since the early 1970s, at the centre of most national public spheres, and its growing reach into institutional centres of power and everyday social meanings. The relative failure to understand how the contexts in which it operates have changed and to study, understand and engage this new force, I argue, is an important underlying reason for the decreasing relevance of “theory”. Moreover, as I will also argue, as it reacts to crisis, literary liberalism has begun to transform itself in increasingly self-reflexive ways, such that the differences between it and theory are less sharp. Literary liberals, who were

among the main antagonists of critical theorists at the outset of the culture wars now find themselves as much under attack as literary theorists and both struggle for relevance in a climate of conservative market populism. My focus here is on literary theory in Australia in part because I am familiar with it, but also because the strands of the above transformation, and the possible agendas that follow from them, are particularly apparent in the Australian literary-cultural sphere. The logic of traditional liberal literary theory in its various strands, I argue, is always raced and nationalist, as are the stakes in the conservative attacks on both liberalism and contemporary critical theory.

Addressing such issues first requires developing an understanding of how Australian literary liberalism works. Here I won't attempt a comprehensive definition of this formation so much as I will sketch its outlines especially in so far as it is complicit with a white patrician nationalism that, in crisis, has arguably begun to fracture and contest itself in response to the new conservative politics of race.

II

The continued tenure of post-war forms of literary criticism in the public imagination coincides with a wider crisis to do with the way information circulates and a question of what the canonical forms of information are, including a crisis in the status of literature itself. Literature, now, looks less like a central canonical cultural form and more like a sub-cultural pursuit. Since the mid-1950s television, cinema, popular music, and design have all staked a claim as sites of cultural knowledge, and have produced social meanings that many find no less compelling than those produced by literature. Genre fiction now plays a significant role in both the publishing marketplace and the cultural sphere. As Simon During says, "literature is becoming less and less a living heritage and more and more a pile of old and aging books" (227). But if literature has declined in relevance to the point where it is the pursuit of "geeks", as During (himself a self-confessed literary "geek") has put it, then what other functions might literature nevertheless have (227)? According to During, the idea of literature lives out a remaining half-life in three different spheres. First, it's fetishised by those "writers, journalistic hacks and a few academics" still devoted to the literary ideal, and who are responsible for the "mummification" of the over-hyped but ultimately empty zombie-literature that "mimes life" in media reviews, writers' festivals, prize ceremonies, grant distribution and so on (227). Second, as a minor art it becomes available to marginalised groups as an arena for articulating political struggle. Third, it gets taken up by the aforementioned "geeks", who are self-recognised cultists

along the lines of literary trainspotters or computer nerds for whom literature is more interesting as a set of possible taxonomies than as a set of social possibilities.

Another ongoing literary function, unmentioned by During, is hegemonic. What remains of literature isn't simply a "pile of old and aging books", but a powerful set of ideological effects. These continue to produce meanings that have little to do with whether or not literary books are written or read. In particular, post-war forms of criticism such as New Criticism and Leavisism helped perpetuate a post-Romantic aesthetic turn in literary criticism that remains relevant in settler nations such as Australia. Such forms of criticism inaugurate a critical language, a class of intellectuals who speak that language, and an audience for that language that together work to delimit the terms of discussion even as Australian writers and critics engage with topical issues such as race politics. Even where political questions are broached, engagement has been at the level of the symbol and has tended to orient around individuated notions of "tolerance" and "inclusion" (coded assimilation), rather than approach questions of racialised social agency or cultural context. At the same time, the dominant forms of public criticism, as spoken in newspaper book reviews, author interviews, prize-giving speeches, literary festival sessions, and so on, explicitly exclude alternative critical models, arguably because of their strong interrogation of the (white) conditions of public knowledge. Literary criticism as it exists in the popular critical consciousness, in short, continues to function as a veiled defence of colonialism and white nationalism.

Literary trainspotters and already marginalised groups don't have much say in the construction of national literatures, except by default. The purveyors of "zombie-lit", on the other hand, often do. This is particularly the case in places where there is perceived to be still something at stake in building and maintaining a national canon, and where the process of national "healing" spoken of by Gordon is compulsively re-enacted as a part of a legacy of postcolonialism. As During says, Australia "isn't [a] good country for literary geeks [. . .] with the will to produce a great national culture", demonstrated by a "dull" literary culture and a "huge governmental investment in literary pedagogy and culture" (228). Sneja Gunew has explained how such formations mitigate against government funding for NESB writers:

It is not that they haven't been producing art; the problem is that their work is neither given the kind of support it deserves nor recognised as part of the national culture [. . .] This aspect of the arts-funding area is animated by principles of access and equity that by current definitions are incompatible with those questions of aesthetic judgement or

“excellence” in the arts which the Australia Council defines as its major mission. (16-17)

Chris Baldick is blunt in his assessment of how national literatures work. Keeping the Huns from the door is how Baldick sums up English literature’s brief for preserving national heritage. The “Huns” in the present context being both ethnicised “outsiders” and those academic theoreticians who want to ask difficult questions, not least about the hidden class-cultural allegiances of literature. As Gunew’s remarks suggest, the bureaucratic mechanisms governments use to “keep the Huns from the door” in their constructions of national literatures are more or less straightforward, but those used by traditional literary criticism are less so.

There is a clue to how national literatures work as strategies of containment in Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch’s announcement, made during the First World War in his inaugural lecture as Professor of English at Cambridge, that we should always be “seeking the author’s intention, but eschewing, for the present at any rate, all general definitions and theories” (Baldick 81). Eagleton has described the rise of aesthetics and the depoliticisation of Romanticism that took place as part of a general turning away from context-based models of literary evaluation and reception:

The effect of aesthetics was to suppress these historical differences. Art was extricated from material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish [. . .] by our own time literature has become effectively identical with the opposite of analytical thought and conceptual enquiry. (21-26)

The spirit of Quiller-Couch’s advice could hardly be taken more seriously than it has been by the Australian literati. Rather than contextualise works as social acts, the emphasis, instead, is on symbol, metaphor, imagination and the integrity of the creative act and the artistic work, as well as the close identification of the artist with the work and its self-conscious moral content. If, as Baldick describes it, in the early twentieth century “literature became [. . .] a museum of national genius, but rarely an object of critical investigation”, then this, too, describes the sanctity with which literature is regarded from both within “zombie-lit” and its related formation, zombie-crit (82). There is much at stake in such a turning away from political enquiry in settler nations. Eagleton explains how Romanticism’s critique of early industrial capitalism was diluted: “If the ‘transcendental’ nature of the imagination offered a challenge to an anaemic rationalism, it could also offer the writer a comfortingly absolute alternative to history itself” (20).

Literature, here, figures in the guise of a secular religion that might ideally guide both the arts and wider public life. This is compatible with the “social mission” that, as Baldick has pointed out, was developed for literature in the nineteenth century by Matthew Arnold and others concerned about social unity, who figured literature as a civilising institution able to smooth over sectarian and class differences, a process that accelerated after the widespread loss of faith in traditional ratifying institutions of state and church following World War I. As Baldick says, “Arnold’s decisive contribution to English literary criticism was a bold extension of its claims to social importance. No less a task than the prevention of Anarchy now fell to the guardians of literary culture” (59).

In his *In A Critical Condition* John Docker describes the rise of aestheticism in post-war Australian literature. As Docker says, it was the formalists, in the shape of the Leavisites and New Critics, who set the orthodoxy, “instituting a metaphysical ascendancy” (87) and installing at its head a pantheon of writers such as Christopher Brennan, Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart, James McAuley, Henry Handel Richardson, Patrick White and Martin Boyd, who fitted the dominant neocolonial romantic ideal (80, 92). Of these figures, Patrick White dominates the Australian literary canon. Docker locates White’s increasing reputation in his winning of the 1959 W. H. Smith & Son Literary Award for *Voss*, the 1960 publication of *Voss* as a Penguin “modern classic”, his winning of the Nobel Prize for literature, the acceptance of White by academic critics throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the emergence of a postcolonial Australia that “required uniquely national icons” (12). More recently, White’s literary reputation has been recuperated in David Marr’s appropriately massive 1991 biography, written with White’s approval, and in the collection of letters that followed.

In his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, T. S. Eliot spoke of the “dissociation of sensibility” that took place sometime in the early seventeenth century, splitting thought from feeling, that necessitated the twentieth-century search for an ideal community to blunt the apocalyptic effects of modern industrialisation and mass culture (111-20). The “apocalyptic” movement was widely influential on literary criticism. It shaped F. R. Leavis’s idea that an era of organic community had splintered with industrialisation, standardising popular culture and rupturing the relationship between popular and high culture in a process of disintegration that was “the most important fact of recent history” (87, qtd. in Milner 114). Following Eliot’s lead, Frank Kermode developed his idea that a professionalised literary criticism should treat *everything* in terms of the Romanticist idea of symbol, metaphor and

the pure Image, not just Eliot's preferred seventeenth-century metaphysical poets (138-61). As John Docker says, for Kermode, "to be truly artistic, truly literary, is to be metaphysical, to be divorced from and opposed to the world of social 'action' and politics" (52). White's writing too, as During has said, is notable for its use of symbols that are buried in the text and require decoding. His use of symbolism signalled a modernist transcendentalism that broke from realism in an attempt to "heighten life" through an allegorical, suggestive style of writing, and to refigure the Australian landscape and colonial past in terms of a universalised metaphysical possibility.

White's modernist transcendentalism, according to During, operated in opposition to humanism, as seen in the figure of Voss who flees the values of "all-too-human society" in search of a "primordial, non-human order" (*Patrick White* 31). To demonstrate Voss's mysticism and his sense that Aborigines offer a glimpse of what he seeks, During cites a passage where Voss gives Dugald, an older Aboriginal man, a totemic brass button. This same passage demonstrates White's emphasis on symbol and metaphor:

The old man was very still, holding the token with the tips of his fingers, as if simply aware in himself of an answer to the white man's mysticism. He could have been a thinking stick, on which the ash had cooled after purification by fire, so wooden was his old scarified, cauterised body, with its cap of grey, brittle ash. (*Patrick White* 31)

The symbol, as Eagleton points out, was given a new valency by late eighteenth-century Romanticism:

the symbol becomes the panacea for all problems. Within it a whole set of conflicts which were felt to be insoluble in ordinary life—between subject and object, the universal and the particular, the sensuous and the conceptual, material and spiritual, order and spontaneity—could be magically resolved. (21)

White, according to During, is in some respects a postcolonial writer who writes against the naturalised ascendancy of European settler culture and who represents colonisation as a "fragile settlement of a country that resists shaping by Europeans", such that the relationship between coloniser and the land is essentially tragic (28). Yet for all this, according to During, White also fails "to absorb the consequences of settlement for indigenous peoples. *The Tree of Man*, which is an allegory of settlement, presents the land literally as *terra nullius*" (29). As During says, "White's descriptions of rural Aborigines never wholly move past primitivism" (30). Ultimately, White fails to take Aboriginal peoples seriously: "for him, native peoples were victims but not agents" (30).

White's primitivism, as Simon During points out, tends to

repeat a metaphor that has done a great deal of political and ideological work in Australia, even more than in other settler-colonial states. The notion that indigenous peoples belong more to nature than to humanity has helped discount their prior claims to the country [. . .] White's primitivist use of Aboriginality in *Voss* is doing the work of what is often called "colonial discourse"—the set of ideas and descriptions of indigenous peoples that smoothed the way for their conquest and naturalised their subjugation. (31)

The formation During describes here is patrician white liberalism—a raced hegemonic formation where non-white peoples figure as objects for white concern and as templates on which white "tolerance" is acted out, but are never granted the same social privileges as whites, especially the power to speak or act for themselves, except under conditions already circumscribed by white power. Metaphor and symbol have a particular role to play here. As Eagleton says, the work of critics such as I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot privileges sameness through the very metaphoricity of its formalism, and by emphasising "patterns of shared belief" (17-53).

This same pattern of benignly liberal silencing, according to Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, can be seen in 1970s white Australian literature about Aborigines. Novels such as Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup* (1974) and Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* (1976) tend to objectify their subject even as they juxtapose "white liberal humanist guilt with the rampant exploitations and cruelties of white capitalism" (230). In Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) the politics of this had already been made clear. Despite its own political concern for Aborigines, the book forecloses Aboriginal subject positions outside the realm of white liberal objectification (see Frow). Keneally has since questioned his approach to the writing of the novel (see Keneally). As Gelder and Salzman say, for books such as *A Kindness Cup*, and novels such as Bruce Pascoe's *Fox* (1988), white high culture offers a space of redemption that tends to stand in for analysis. In *Fox*, a novel in which the main Aboriginal character is named after an introduced species, the "novel ends with Fox's painterly vision of a redgum in the desert, recalling 'the visions of Tiepolo and Calieri, Lazzarini and Tintoretto': Aboriginality comes second to this sort of Europeanization" (Gelder and Salzman 234).

The patterned link between the formal and the social persists in contemporary Australian literature, including in some genuinely popular texts. In Tim Winton's 1984 Miles-Franklin-Award-winning *Shallows*, non-whites live out a half-life on the edge of town as a metaphorical part of "the land", their

comings and goings marked mainly by obituary notices and not otherwise entering into the social life of the central narrative. Winton's best-selling *Cloudstreet*, which won the 1992 Miles Franklin Award, provided the basis for a play that received an extraordinary popular and critical reception because, as some critics said, it spoke to Australia's craving for reconciliation with the Aboriginal people (Neil Armfield and Nick Enright, qtd. in Fallon 23). One theatre had to install five extra phone lines to cope with public demand and, as another critic wrote, "Every review from its 1998 Sydney and Perth seasons, every interview, every article, speaks of this giant, lumbering beast of a show with wonder, joy, and proud surprise" (Fiona Scott-Norman, qtd. in Fallon 23). Yet, as Mary Kathleen Fallon pointed out:

There were three "black" presences in *Cloudstreet*. One was a nameless character, the "black" narrator who wandered on and off the stage, the second was a shadow on a screen—the ghost of a suicided "black" child and the third was the invisible spirits of "black" children rising from the ground, their "presence" simply described by the "black" narrator. (23)

The narrator, as Fallon says, serves as a "sort of cosmic Uncle Tom, legitimating 'white' occupation as a benign and benevolent 'dusky' guardian angel straight out of Christian iconography" (23). All the black characters in the play are dead, whereas all the major protagonists are white. Germaine Greer has described how David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), which deals with the European settlement of Australia, plays out similar assumptions. Published in the Year of The World's Indigenous Peoples, the book was well received and Malouf described as "Australia's greatest living writer" by "such sensitive people as Antonia Byatt, Malcolm Bradbury, Victoria Glendinning and Tom Paulin". Yet, as Greer says, "the only black [in the book] who is allowed to speak is the fake black" (11). Ken Gelder has made similar criticisms of Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998), which he argues,

reactivated the bush settlement novel, an otherwise dead literary form in this country. But it did so both to distinguish itself from it, and to do it all over again. *Eucalyptus* played out a fantasy of re-settlement after the fact, wiping the traumas of colonialism away in order to plant the landscape afresh and stake an even stronger claim on it in the process. There are no Aborigines in *Eucalyptus*: they would only upset its vision of total ownership, of full settler immersion into the landscape: of living in Australia. (34)

Just as Aborigines are marginalised in these texts, so, in the context of Australian literary production, writing by Aborigines tends to be marginalised in so far as they don't generally exhibit the paradigmatic aestheticism of canonical

writings, are often autobiographical, lack self-conscious displays of literary virtuosity, or are determinedly vernacular. In *Haunted by the Past*, for instance, Ruby Langford Ginibi writes:

While Nobby was in the hospital he was examined by a doctor appointed by the police. He was also examined by a doctor I got hold of from the Aboriginal Medical Service. The two doctors' reports were very different. Makes ya wonder, aye! (65)

First-person empiricism tends to operate as a marker of "bad writing" in a critical regime that values abstractedness, complexity, narrative distance, decontextualisation, depoliticisation, and the universalising, allegorical treatment of subjects. At the same time, the burden of having to be authentic means that Aboriginal writers tend to be locked into indigeneity as a genre where the best opportunity on offer is to document either racist oppression or static tribal traditions. Similarly, citing the refusal of NESB writers such as Antigone Kefala to "abide by the conventions of classic narrative" (74), Sneja Gunew comments, "[t]he charge of incompetence is a familiar one in reviews of works by so-called ethnic writers" (95). As Gunew says, it is through accusations of incompetence that critics strive to protect themselves from the voice of the Other, which might destabilise the coherence which underpins their own language and subject positions.

But the point here isn't to repeat all over again a well-known argument about the white patrician-liberal traditions of Australian national literatures, so much as to show how the knowledges produced by such literatures integrate with the popular, and to suggest that they transmute into wider public knowledges outside the mainstream literary sphere. This happens when well-known literary and cultural figures engage with topical issues of the day. For example, the idea of "felt experience" is a standard trope in the literary author Helen Garner's non-fiction, as it is in the writing of well-known public intellectuals such as Robert Manne, in so far as both tend to personalise their approach to their subject matter so that their emotional and physical reaction to perceived moral decline becomes emblematic of its wider national significance.¹

As Eagleton writes of Leavisism:

Morality is no longer to be grasped as a formulated code or explicit ethical system: it is rather a sensitive preoccupation with the whole quality of life itself, with the oblique, nuanced particulars of human experience [. . .] Since such values are nowhere more vividly dramatized than in literature, brought home to "felt experience" with all the unquestionable reality of a blow on the head, literature becomes more than just a handmaiden of moral ideology: it is a moral ideology of the modern age. (27)

Writers such as Garner and Manne don't use symbolism in their non-fiction so much as they set themselves up as symbols that embody the Leavisite ideal, especially a capacity for "moral seriousness". Both present themselves as critic-exemplars of the sort that John Docker describes in his writings on Australian, especially Melbourne, cultural life:

In its social and aesthetic attitudes it develops the thinking of Arnold, Eliot, Pound and Leavis, in seeing literature and knowledge as central to society. It is a tradition which goes back to Coleridge's social thinking, and his idea that "cultural values" are embodied in a "clerisy", a central educated group, which stands as an ideal for the rest of society. (ix-x)

Manne is explicit about his influences. Railing against what he saw as the manipulative, potentially Holocaust-trivialising sentimentality of Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, he wrote:

I was educated in a world where voices like those of F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling—who thought that the task of criticism was vital to culture—still mattered . . . I remain attached to this world. (*The Way We Live Now* 210)

Both Manne and Garner are members of a circle that, since the mid-1980s, has moved, if not exactly to the centre of Australian public life, then to a position of influence as a neo-Leavisite public sphere that does certain kinds of cultural work. Publishers such as Text Publishing and, more recently, Black Inc., which publishes books and magazines such as *Australian Quarterly Essay* and *The Monthly*, have played a pivotal role in sustaining Australian coterie liberalism, as forums for coterie identities such as Manne, Garner, Don Watson, and Raimond Gaita, and a powerbase for others such as Text publisher Michael Heyward and Black Inc. owner Morry Schwartz. *Australian Book Review*, edited by Peter Rose (and with Manne and other coterie figures such as former Morag Fraser and former *Quarterly Essay* editor Peter Craven on the board), provides another forum, as do their regular broadsheet newspaper articles and reviews. Small though this group might be, its access to various forms of what Benedict Anderson calls "print-capitalism", in the shape of magazine, journal, book and newspaper publishing, allows its members to present themselves as avatars of a much wider "imagined community" (to use another of Anderson's terms), who share their literary interests and moral-political outlook.

The kind of work this group does is best summed up by Francis Mulhern's comment that Leavisism was:

[a] quintessentially *petit bourgeois* revolt, directed against a cultural order that it could not fundamentally alter or replace [. . .] It was,

accordingly, a *moralistic* revolt from within the given culture: bearer not of an alternative order but of the insistence that the existing order should live by its word. (qtd. in Milner 113)

The above formation operates as a broadly representative national moral conscience that indexes events against, and demands fidelity to, the truths of enlightenment humanism. The high-culture humanist resonances of their book titles—Manne's *The Way We Live Now* recycles Trollope's title of 1875 and imitates its moralism; Gait's *A Common Humanity* echoes F. R. Leavis's *The Common Pursuit*—emphasise this ambition. They are thus deeply engaged in what Marian Sawyer has described as the broader project of Australian social liberalism which is to defend the ideal of the interventionist, ethical state against the imposts of free-market ideology and the withdrawal of the state from wealth redistribution (Sawyer). Ultimately they have provided a "soft" oppositionality that sets itself up in critique of formations figured as threats to bourgeois liberal mores—radical feminism, racism—but which has rarely seriously questioned the whiteness that arguably predicates Australian public life.

Like the novelists mentioned above, members of the above formation have tended to enact a logic of whiteness even as they aspire to righteous anti-racism, so as to maintain the authority and coherence of their own speaking positions. Manne's "In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right", published in *Australian Quarterly Essay*, is in many ways an exemplary text that mounts a sustained critique of new right attempts to discredit the claims of the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children. Yet Manne's essay overlooks the ways in which Aborigines have themselves exercised agency and resistance throughout a long history of welfarist child-theft, apart from mention of an entrenched "fear of the police" that resulted in people "running off into the bush" at the first sight of officialdom. These are simple people, not people who have developed intricate informal systems for the evasion of white colonial authority and strong political networks, such as the National Tribal Council and other organisations that, since the 1960s, have repeatedly charged the government with human rights abuses against Aborigines (see Schaffer). Manne's text includes one brief mention of "Aboriginal politics", in the context of a mention of a memoir of Aboriginal political action that is labelled "charming" ("In Denial" 12-15). Aborigines here are understood not as social agents but as victims in need of charity. Women, in particular, are constructed almost entirely as mothers in need of chivalry.

The dominant formations at work here, in other words, are those of the white family, and indeed, as Kay Schaffer has pointed out, the white Western nation. The staging of Manne's text as a debate between humanist liberals and the

new right tends to reduce those whose lives are at stake in that debate to the status of “evidence” whereas issues of “national importance” are played out exclusively amongst whites, even as Manne himself mentions how new right responses to *Bringing Them Home: The Stolen Generations Report* overlooked the contribution of Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson as co-chair of the enquiry. Manne’s notion of “our legacy of unspeakable shame”, Schaffer suggests, further pertains to “a legacy of ‘the tribe’, the ancestral white nation of Australia that comes to stand in for the whole”. As such:

The major players in the national debate, even those who contest the findings of the Report and those who contest the contesters, are able to maintain the reductionist “us” and “them” division between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians. (Schaffer)

The way western cultural politics is done always tracks back into literary knowledge, as a legacy of the social mission granted to literature. As Foong Ling Kong has written, Garner’s *The First Stone* works to other those, including young feminists such as those portrayed negatively in the book, one of whom was Jewish, who “don’t fit in” to the ordered social schema of Australian patrician whiteness Garner has in mind. For Kong a painting of a desert town in North Africa that Garner admires in the book is emblematic. Described by its owner as “more than beautiful [. . .] It’s accurate. It’s almost all white, and yet the white contains different colours as well” (*The First Stone* 190), Kong argues that “[t]he painting harked back to an historical strand of Australian culture that Garner tried to restore in her narrative: whiteness, order, paternalistic authority, the trope of manhood”—all of which the young feminists in the book “were on the verge of destroying” (72). Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, too, is structured around a series of generic binarisms oriented around anxiety about whiteness, especially the difference between the old immigrant (Italian) family of the murder victim who is at the centre of the book, and the new immigrant (Indian) family of the murderess. Whereas victim Joe Cinque’s parents are “composed and civilised” (49) (“What a strong family they must be” (57)), the murderess’s family is portrayed as controlling and calculating, and remain objects of suspicion and undifferentiated otherness. Having noted, when she visits them, the “marked Asian flavour” (186) of the shopping centre near where they live, Garner is surprised to discover the “old, established, bourgeois solidity” of their suburb with “its splendid trees” (186-7), just as she is later surprised by, and patronises, their middle-class confidence. The difference between the Cinques and the Singhs is between good assimilator and bad, between working class humbleness and *arriviste* not-knowing-your-place, between understanding established moral codes and not.

Garner and Manne arguably represent two increasingly divergent streams in Australian coterie liberalism. Garner is of Old Australia, with its wariness of ethnic difference and its dependence on white ways of knowing, and a strand of liberalism that has failed to change in response to the new conservatism, except to internalise some of its “anti-victim” rhetoric and its championing of the moral politics of “personal responsibility”. Manne is arguably representative of an emerging self-conscious, self-critical strand in Australian liberalism, given that his work increasingly offers a critique from within of liberal whiteness, developed in response to a full-frontal confrontation with the race politics of the new conservatism. His introduction to an edited collection of essays, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle’s Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, for example, is notable for its openly political tone and its shift away from the benevolent white patrician register of *In Denial* to an implicit acknowledgement that different histories and different ways of knowing exist, and that white intellectual knowledge frames blacks. Included in the collection is the “Statement of Peggy Patrick”, in which Patrick tells of the massacre of her family by whites and how it felt to have her account personally ridiculed and dismissed by Windschuttle (215-17). It appears without the framing glosses of white “overseeing” and without editorial correction to its “improper” grammar. It’s perhaps no accident that such innovations appear in the context of the attack on the very notion of Aboriginal social agency that predicates Windschuttle’s work.

There are perhaps signs of a similar shift in literary fiction. For example, Andrew McGahan’s Miles Franklin Award-winning novel *The White Earth* (2004), an unabashedly political novel of white settlement, reaches back before the metaphysical ascendancy to adopt the mechanisms of nineteenth-century gothic fiction to tell its story: a family saga of illness, inheritance, secret rooms, mad housekeepers and a neglected mansion with its unkempt gardens, that is told through the eyes of a young boy. With its almost populist emphasis on narrative over metaphor, *The White Earth* seems almost crude to the reader accustomed to the formalist, ironic sophistication of the modern novel. The Aborigines in the book, who first appear as symbol or metaphor, turn out to have agency and talk back, both to the (white) narrator and to the form of the novel itself, which they disrupt, just as all the typically modernist imaginings of metaphysicality, spirituality and connectedness with landscape that the novel offers up from its outset, turn out to be bogus.

As Ken Wark has argued, little progress has taken place if, when

history is spoken about in public [. . .] it is still the property of mostly white and very class-bound moral/aesthetic elite. All that’s changed

is that such an elite has colonised radical and critical histories and claimed them as the subject matter for an unchanged mode of cultural authority.

On the face of it he could easily be writing about Garner or Manne's work. My point here though, is that gradualist though the above shifts might be, cultural formations such as coterie liberalism are never static, and that in the case of Australian coterie liberalism something *has* begun to change, not least its modes of cultural authority. Having borne witness to recent conservative attacks on Aborigines and asylum-seekers, in particular, and under intense pressure from conservatives attacking both its key figures and even its normative understandings of racial tolerance and multiculturalism, liberalism has arguably started to interrogate its own racialised practices.

III

If this might seem a small and very particular local history that is therefore unable to say much about the more general problem of how literary criticism makes itself "public", then it is a history nevertheless firmly located in contemporary global politics and in the struggles over the meaning and legacy of modernity and the West that constitute cultural politics today; struggles that have been amplified since 9/11. The anxieties about whiteness, western culture and the presence of the Other on which social liberalism is covertly predicated, have moved to the centre of public life in the post-9/11 era, deployed by conservatives in an open and aggressive race politics, oriented around a pre-occupation with the status of western knowledge, given the presence of others. This cultural and political offensive can be understood in the context of a remarkable thirty-year ascendancy during which conservatism has moved from the margins to the centre of western civic discourse, having institutionalised itself at almost every level, and during which liberalism has been marginalised and is now the subject of relentless attacks by conservatives.

This ascendancy has changed the contexts in which literary-critical theory operates. Liberalism, now, is in decline as a social discourse, its institutions in disarray, a situation that has arguably predicated the declining relevance of literary-critical theory, increasingly mired in its own largely gestural repertoires, given its status as a largely oppositional discourse founded in a culture of critique. To put it bluntly, "theory" needed liberalism, even if this dependence was always disavowed. As the central value-generating mechanisms of social liberalism have lost force—the broadsheet press, public broadcasting, the literary novel and its canons—so, it turns out, contemporary critical theory was equally founded in them and is equally prey to the same forces of

marketisation and discrediting by conservatives. Not only does this shift in the location of socio-political power change the cultural dynamic in which “theory” operates, the critical silence that has surrounded this change reflects on the efficacy of theory as a set social practices. In short, while literary-critical theorists have been arguing for a post-modern ethics founded in difference that addresses the shortcomings of white patrician liberalism, conservatives, having deployed their own corrosive critique of enlightenment humanism and liberal democratic politics, have been far more effectively reversing the twentieth-century liberal-modernist program in an increasingly successful attempt to reinstate pre-modern conventions in such things as human rights, labour rights, reproductive rights, civil rights and the rights of private property. Embarrassingly, even as crisis has enveloped liberalism, Australian literary-critical theorists, having failed to notice the changing contexts in which they operate, have failed, even, to mount a critique of the new conservatism and its cultures, literary, critical, political, and institutional. It is “old-style” liberal public intellectuals who, by and large, have made the running on important recent debates on issues such as the rise of “economic rationalism”, the stolen generations, euthanasia, asylum-seekers, human rights, torture, war, and the future of civil society. Whereas post-war literary-critical formations produced several generations of critics who made major contributions to public debate, contemporary Australian literary-critical theory has failed to produce a single figure who plays a leading public role in such debates.

Recent attacks on contemporary literary-critical theory have made clear what the cultural stakes are in current debates, not least because such attacks centre on contemporary critical theory in so far as it offers a critique of white nationalism. Stanley Fish has outlined the ways in which 9/11 has become a pretext for a series of attacks on US academe that aggressively reinstated nationalism as the foundation for “proper” criticism. “America, love it or leave it!” became, as Fish suggests, the standard formulation around which dissenters must genuflect; to do otherwise is to be “directly responsible for the weakening of the nation’s moral fiber and indirectly responsible for the attack a weakened nation has suffered” (27). After 9/11, the argument went, postmodernists were simply proved wrong. Intellectuals in general and cultural theorists in particular, according to a range of mainstream commentators, needed to drop their anti-Western posturing, learn that the real is real, and that dealing with passenger jets being flown into crowded buildings requires more than just understanding the politics of representation. “Cultural relativism” is out, moral absolutism is in; there are fundamental truths worth defending, and at the heart of such truths is the sanctity of the western nation.

The precedent for such criticisms had been set well before 9/11. In 1995 Lynne Cheney, present US vice-president Richard Cheney's wife, joined together with Senator Joseph Lieberman to create the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, to pressure academics and faculty to teach the "truth" that civilisation itself "is best exemplified in the West and indeed in America" (Foner and Gilmore). The organisation's November 2001 report, "Defending Civilisation: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It", damned academics those whose professional views don't uncategorically support US foreign policy, naming those whose statements since 9/11 it considered unpatriotic. 9/11, however, added new impetus to such attacks. In 2002 another neo-conservative, Daniel Pipes, used his Middle East Forum's project, Campus Watch, as a vehicle to publish dossiers on eight "unpatriotic" university professors who had criticised US foreign policy. A second list identified 146 further "apologists for suicide bombings and militant Islam" (McNeil). Articles on websites such as David Horowitz's *FrontPageMagazine.com* have targeted individual academics as "terrorists" and "fifth columnists" (Benson and Dohrn; Laksin), and Horowitz has drafted an Academic Bill of Rights designed to "defend 'intellectual diversity' on college campuses and remove politics from the classroom" (Horowitz). Legislatures in 16 US states have introduced the bill, which, for all its pretensions to "neutrality", will undoubtedly have an effect on intrinsically political courses dealing with such things as race and gender discrimination.

Such attacks, with their theme that teachers should "teach not preach", have served as a template for Australian conservative commentators such as Andrew Bolt, who, in a series of columns in 2005 excoriated critical theory, singling out academics by name (Bolt, "Paid to be Pointless"; "A Mouthful of Tripe"; "A Pack of Pajeros"; "My Answer to Prof Macintyre"). Such calls can be understood in the context of Bolt's calls for a return to the primacy of western culture (Bolt, "interview"). "In the West", according to the conservative columnist Janet Albrechtsen, "moral relativism has spawned a values cringe". Writing on the pernicious inability of Muslim clerics to understand Australian values Albrechtsen writes that:

ignorance of Western values goes beyond new immigrants. It infects our society [. . .]. Why aren't our schoolchildren or university students learning about the individual liberty unleashed by economic freedom? Instead, as reported by the *Australian* recently, even English literature is taught through the prism of Marxism, decades after Marxism failed. It's a bit like pressing on with flat-earth theory even after Copernicus came along. Or worse, denouncing Copernicus as a heretic. (12)

Conservative attacks on “postmodern” academic theorists, with their normative “back to basics” understandings of education and underpinning logic of whiteness, function as a coded reference to a dangerous world of pure cultural difference, where no race or culture is deemed superior. Bolt’s attacks on humanities academics worked in tandem with calls from then federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson to rid curricula of spurious “cappuccino courses”, and statements by prime minister John Howard expressing concern at the inroads “postmodernism” has made into curricula, amidst media and Federal government attacks on “critical literacy” programs in secondary English curricula.²

Such criticisms, with their normative understandings of education and coded logic of “back to basics” whiteness have a different tenor to traditional liberal antipathy to literary-critical theory. Whereas liberals generally attack critical theory in defence of modernist aesthetics and in a more or less instinctive reaction against the difficult questions theory poses about the hidden class-cultural allegiances of liberalism, conservatives such as Cheney, Horowitz, Bolt or Albrechtsen are arguably doing the public relations work of a more aggressive neoliberal project to undo the gains of post-war liberation politics to do with decolonisation, group rights, and so on. Theirs is a white, populist, majoritarian project that goes to the heart of the politics of democratic representation and which seeks to undermine traditional democratic understandings of fairness, equality and wealth redistribution. Projects such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni and the *New Criterion* make plain that the stakes in the culture wars are no longer simply nationalist but now involve an aggressive universalist defence of western culture. Even the expression “the end of relativism”, which achieved media currency in the wake of 9/11, covertly hints of western cultural suprematism, framed in terms of a rearticulation of cultural absolutism and antipathy to liberal multiculturalism. This essentialist turn marks the end of the post World-War II project whereby decolonised nations were accepted into the fold at least partly on their own terms (which, through the Cold War they could to some extent dictate), and during which mass immigration from non-white nations was allowed to some degree to complicate the way the West understood itself. Similarly, the backlash against theory can be understood as a repudiation of intellectual formations that seriously engage with cultural difference.

IV

Liberalism has been a vital foil for we who set up our disciplinary concerns, and indeed, our disciplinary identities, in terms of a critique of modernity. Until

now critiquing the language of liberalism and classical humanism has been central to critical theory which, as a traditional left critique, has positioned itself outside systems and thought to establish that ways in which they work as common sense. But if the dominant formations at work in the public sphere are no longer those of liberalism, but are conservative, our focus and methods must therefore change. At the outset, this requires making the new conservatism and its social texts a sustained focus of our scholarly attentions. It seems extraordinary that there has been little sustained critique of the new conservatism from within the new humanities, given that the very “history of the present”, from its literatures to its political mandates, is increasingly underpinned by the social nostalgia, populist authoritarianism, and market logic of the new conservatism.

To do so will require building links, not least between the new humanities and liberalism. If this might seem antithetical to “our” intellectual project, then it should be noted that one of the keys to the success of the new conservatism in the US has been its coalition-building across often extremely wide gaps—between blue-collar workers and finance elites; between Christian “heartlanders” and academic economists. Learning to accommodate critical differences between strands of progressive politics is essential to political change. There will be no meaningful critique of conservatism until theorists understand and acknowledge recent shifts in liberalism and begin to make common cause with liberals, not least because the very formations that theorists have habitually critiqued, now need support. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued:

the task of critical theory has been reversed. That task used to be the defence of private autonomy from the advancing troops of the “public sphere”, smarting under the oppressive rule of the omnipotent impersonal state and its many bureaucratic tentacles or their smaller-scale replicas. The task is now to defend the vanishing public realm, or rather to refurnish and repopulate the public space fast emptying owing to the desertion of both sides: the exit of the “interested citizen”, and the escape of real power into the territory which, for all that the extant democratic institutions are able to accomplish, can only be described as an “outer space”. (39)

There are some incidental lessons to learn here. “Our” oft-articulated opposition to Leavisism and New Criticism has tended to disguise similarities. “We” who work in the humanities are generally of the same class as their practitioners, and have replicated more or less the same formations in a different guise, replete with canons, ritual genuflections, and self-satisfied ritualised repertoires of meaning. We tend to circulate in narrow social

circles, live, eat and shop far from where blue-collar workers live or minority diasporas (except for touristic, often gastronomic, excursions). Our “natural” constituencies are generally, in fact, of precisely the same (bourgeois) cultural formations as are appealed to by those traditionalists we often deride. One of the striking things about Australian literary criticism is how white it remains. To glance around the faculty table is to be confronted with a sea of white middle-class faces; “others” are welcomed as exotics. Those “others” we invite in—queer lecturers, indigenous lecturers—tend to teach in their own identity- or region-based ghetto-fields. This at the same time as, in Australia as elsewhere, English has become entrenched as the dominant language of critical theory. In other words, the process of self-critique that some liberals have undertaken might easily be undertaken from within “theory”.

Another lesson is more pedagogical. If traditional liberal literary theory has inculcated itself in what I have called the “popular critical consciousness”, then by this I refer to the ways in which such criticism has become one of the forms of academic knowledge that have a major impact outside the academy—others include psychology and economics—having entered, in most western nations, the wider vernacular. Ideas such as individual “talent”, “genius”, intrinsic “value”, sovereign “authorship” and “imagination”, autonomous “creativity”, and “felt experience” continue to strongly inform public understandings of literature. I refer, too, to the ways in which such literary theory continues to play a social role as an explicitly critical discourse that informs (and structures) contemporary debates about pressing social issues, and, as sketched out above, the ways in which, as a paradigmatic form of liberalism, it continues to underpin ideas about what intellectuals do, based on the secular idea that criticism is a form of public morality. Liberalism has done this because it has functioned effectively as a pedagogy and because of the ways in which its institutions (media, judicial, educational) have closely interlocked with the dominant institutions of twentieth-century state-building (economic, governmental, pedagogical). Because of these connections it has been able to frame its social message in positive terms (enlightening, educational, democratising), and to produce powerful social narratives that have worked not only at the level of high culture, but at the level of a middle and even low culture, in so far as liberalism has operated as a machine for producing narratives of secular morality.

What I’m proposing is that in addition to high theory we embrace “low theory”. That is, a theory that states its concerns at the level of the vernacular and the popular. This doesn’t mean a process of simple “translation”, as if our concerns can simply be reconfigured to other contexts more or less intact,

but a reassessment of ways of working and writing with the needs of different audiences in mind in so far as they are constitutive of our projects, that puts the critique of difference and representation in new frames. Low theory would also involve learning to use the logic of affect since, as Larry Grossberg has pointed out, this is the logic of contemporary politics and the public sphere (257-9). This is in part why the affective language of critics such as Garner and Manne has resonance. If this might sound populist then that isn't necessarily the case. Rather than proceed from the abstract, we need to proceed from accounts of people and place so as to tell stories that make our concerns real in ways that resonate with broader audiences. Such discursive stratagems, it seems to me, should be the very thing that theorists are good at.

At the same time, we might rediscover "our" voice and responsibilities as intellectuals, having passed such responsibilities over to "consumers" of culture in a populist move that tallies neatly enough with the populist logic of the new conservatism (even as, covertly, like such conservatives, we seek to retain our status as arbiters). As Larry Grossberg has said:

The fact that authority is socially constructed, that all knowledge is historically implicated with systems of power, does not mean that all authority can or should be rejected, or that all systems of power are equally condemnable. Too often, left intellectuals seem to think that their only responsibility is to give over their speaking position to those less capable of manipulating the codes of public discourse and perhaps less knowledgeable about certain matters. I am not trying to suggest that nonintellectuals are dopes or not worth listening to. On the contrary, I am suggesting that intellectual labor produces its own value which we must be able and willing to use. (267)

If one of the great lessons of the ongoing public tenure of postwar critical forms is the power of effective pedagogy, then with the above in mind we might also make a renewed commitment to effective teaching. Many enrol in the humanities in the hope of finding specific counter-discourses to those offered in mainstream discussion, yet academics are often poor at delivering them. Too often academic practice is oriented around the old leftist dream of creating an elite counter-society of critics, at the expense of thinking of all students as potential lifelong autonomous critical agents. Much of what we offer, in the form of abstracted lectures that are really the start of peer-directed papers or that derive from our latest research enthusiasm, makes little connection to students' lives and experiences. Often the only subject position offered students is as potential initiates into an arcane order, oriented around reverence for certain key theorists and critical practices that many find either alienating or simply ridiculous, while an over-anxious elite dutifully "learns the

discourse” so as to take up a place in a hierarchy that is often uncomfortably reminiscent of the most clubbish excesses of post-war literary criticism.

White western nationalism is always at stake in questions about the role of criticism, not least literary criticism, and recent reiterations of the cultural logic of whiteness makes the project of critical theory more, not less, important. That the central ideas of contemporary critical theory—its key term is “difference”—should acquire popular valency is therefore important given its ongoing project of critiquing the white logic of nation. This project that has become urgent in the wake of 9/11, the “war on terror” and the war in Iraq, where the logics of white nationalism are amplified in the context of a coded western suprematism, where the logocentric politics of presence, empiricism and affect have become all-important, not least because the rise of the new conservatism since the mid-1970s has undermined liberation politics and changed many of its key definitions, in a specific assault on accepted notions of “rights”, “equality” and “democracy”, not to mention those of education and criticism. It has been easy for theorists to imagine themselves as above all this, having superseded mere humanism. Few seem to realise how much has changed, and how all the fundamental ideals of the twentieth-century civilising project now need to be fought for all over again.

NOTES

- ¹ Garner’s *The First Stone* gets going with “rushes of horror”, “twinges of alarm”, and a “stab” of curiosity, follows with “a rush of terrible sadness”, and a “gradual chilling of my blood”, and concludes with “a bomb of fury and disgust” that Garner felt “go off inside my head” (16, 37, 122, 125, 156). A similar series of visceral reactions underpins the narrative of *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. At different parts of the story Garner has her “girl-hackles” raised, is enveloped in a “blur of warmth”, or filled with “a wary, puzzled curiosity”, depending on whether she is in contact with the guilty or the innocent. She also becomes an almost involuntary medium for stories of significance: “A story lies in wait for a writer. It flashes out silent signals”, Garner says. “Without knowing she is doing it, the writer receives the message, drops everything, and turns to follow” (18, 66, 25). In Manne’s *The Culture of Forgetting*, his book on the hoax novelist Helen Darville-Demidenko he sets up his diagnosis of the affair so as to present his physical shock, which he details at length, at Darville’s anti-Semitism, as evidence of a general national cultural decline, as if he were a living, chemical moral barometer of the national moral health. Shock combined with high moral rectitude plays a similar part in Manne’s 2005 essay on Christos Tsiolkas’s novel *Dead Europe*, in which Manne accuses Tsiolkas of anti-Semitism, suggesting that Manne understands himself as the personification of a more generalised moral code that the book transgresses.

- ² The *Australian* began such a campaign in 2005 with a series of aggressive anti-critical-literacy articles notable for their almost complete absence of counter-comment. It was difficult, moreover, to determine precisely what they were campaigning against. Many academic teachers of critical theory would sympathise with their attacks on “outcome-based” education and championing of better basic literacy skills, but these were mixed in a confused mélange with attacks on postmodernism, popular culture, and the very notion that students should develop any sort of critical faculties as part of their formal education.

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